Exploring the Role of the Principal in Creating a Functional School Culture

Dr. Keshni Bipath
Senior Lecturer
Department of Education Management and Policy Studies
Faculty of Education
Groenkloof Campus
University of Pretoria
South Africa

Abstract

This article contributes to ongoing attempts to identify predictors for creating a functional school culture in South Africa and explores the role of the principal in creating such a culture. A review of the literature reveals a trend towards recognising the importance of a leader in determining the functional culture of an organisation. Much has been written about the importance of culture and school improvement, but relatively little has been explored regarding the 'primary embedding mechanisms' and 'secondary reinforcing mechanisms' (Schein, 2004) which are essential aspects in the role of the principal in creating a functional school culture. I examine the predictors of a functional school through the theoretical lens of Schein's theory of organisational culture (2004). Thereafter, we report on a qualitative study in two schools in a rural area, which examined the importance of the role of the principal in culture creation in functional schools.

Keywords: Leadership; school culture; principal; functional schools; dysfunctional schools; South Africa

Introduction

"It was the best of emotional intelligence, it was the worst of emotional intelligence, it was the school of functionality , it was the school of dysfunctionality, it was the epoch of optimism, it was the epoch of pessimism, it was the season of teamwork and collaboration, it was the season of absenteeism and defiance, it was the spring of hope in the functional school, it was the winter of despair in the dysfunctional school; the functional school had everything before them, the dysfunctional school had nothing before them, the learners in the functional school were all going directly to university, the learners in the dysfunctional school were all going directly the other way – in short, the period was so far like the present period, that some of its noisiest teacher unions insisted on it being received, for good or for evil, in the superlative degree of comparison only (Bipath, 2008, 57).

The above quotation highlights the difference between a functional school and a dysfunctional school in South Africa. Defining the role of the school principal in creating a culture that leads to school functionality is an effective strategy to promote the success of a school. This article reports on an investigation into what constitutes culture creation mechanisms ('primary embedding mechanisms' and 'secondary reinforcement mechanisms' according to Schein (2004)) in a functional school and tries to answer the question: "What is the role of a principal in creating a functional school culture?" In order to investigate the phenomenon, observations and interviews were conducted over four weeks with the principal and staff in two schools in the same socio-economic environment, with a view to extracting the differences in the culture creation mechanisms between principals. The differences in the behaviour of the two principals provided evidence that the role of the principal in occupying his/her space as a leader and being proactive in the creation of culture, led to a school being more functional.

Context

A school in South Africa is defined as being functional (or otherwise) by the results achieved in the Senior Certificate Examination (SCE). This examination is written by all South African learners attending public schools, at the end of 12 years of schooling.

A school that scores an overall pass rate of between 80 and 100% in the SCE is regarded as a functional school, and a school with a pass rate of less than 40% is regarded as dysfunctional. Previous studies (Bipath, 2002, 2006; Gallie, 2007) have shown that low socio-economic background is not a predictor of a dysfunctional school. This research was therefore carried out in two schools which have the same low socio-economic background. One school scored 100% in the SCE and the other, a mere 33%. The aim was to explore the principal's role in creating culture and thus contributing to school functionality.

Theoretical Framework

Schein's definition of culture

Schein (2004) defines organisational culture as a "pattern of basic assumptions which are invented, discovered, or developed by a given group as it learns to cope with its external adaptation and internal integration. These basic assumptions must have worked well enough to be considered valid and therefore, to be taught to new members of staff. Organisational culture is the right way to perceive, think, and feel in relation to problems".

Cunningham and Cordiero (2000: 94) argue that culture is "a continuous process of creating meaning in social and material contexts". Kleiman (2000: 412) defines culture as "a society's set of assumptions, values and rules about social interactions". Pai and Adler (2001:21) define culture "as that pattern of knowledge, skills, behaviour, attitudes and beliefs, as well as material artefacts produced by human society and transmitted from one generation to another". Organisational culture refers to a system of shared meaning held by members, distinguishing the organisation from other organisations. This system of shared meaning is a set of key characteristics that the organisation values, according to Robbins, Judge, Odendaal and Roodt (2009). The same authors emphasise that strong organisational culture increases behavioural consistency. In a strong culture, the organisation's core values are held strongly and shared widely. The more members accept the core values and the greater their commitment to those values, the stronger the culture. In this paper, 'culture' is considered to be the set of important assumptions, beliefs, values and attitudes that the principal creates and members of the school share.

Leadership and culture are two sides of the same coin

The research on effective schools shows the importance of school culture (Earley & Weindling, 2004: 20). The main task for the principal is to create a shared vision and provide the necessary leadership to shape the culture of the school. Schein (1986: 2) writes that organisational cultures are created by leaders. He emphasises that one of the decisive functions of leadership may well be the creation, the management and, if and when it becomes necessary, the destruction of culture. Culture and leadership are two sides of the same coin and neither can really be understood without considering the other. Schein (*ibid*.) stresses that if any theme remains underdeveloped in the leadership research, it may well be that the only thing of real importance that leaders can do is to create and manage culture, and that the unique talent of leaders is their ability to shape culture.

Effective leadership, as argued by Hopkins, Ainscow and West (1994), requires a change from a style which emphasises direction and control, to one which emphasises delegation and empowerment, in which the leadership functions are widely shared. Such a style of leadership is concerned with changing values and beliefs, with developing and communicating a shared vision for the future of the school, and with inspiring, motivating and empowering staff. In other words, the aim is "to create a new agenda for school leadership, that of transforming the school culture into one where leadership is spread widely among the staff group and all the members of staff are capable of contributing" (Brown & Desmond, 1999: 231). Many improving schools demonstrate the characteristic that staff at all levels are encouraged to take responsibility and to take calculated risks. In short, they are encouraged "to practise fearlessness" (Brown & Desmond, 1999: 231).

Deal and Peterson (1999: 7-9) point out that strong culture can serve to:

- Foster school effectiveness and productivity
- Improve collegial and collaborative activities that improve communication and problem-solving practices
- Foster successful change and programme improvement efforts
- Build employee commitment and closer identification among staff, students and administrators
- Amplify the energy, motivation and vitality of the school staff
- Focus daily behaviour and attention on what is important and valued.

The researcher agrees that the above points are major ingredients for a functional school. So whose responsibility is it to ensure that these ingredients are present in creating the necessary strong culture?

Hopkins, Ainscow and West (1996: 86) emphasise that "the culture of the school is the key to successful school improvement", where culture is defined as "the deeper level of basic assumptions and beliefs that are shared by members of the organisation, that operate unconsciously, and that define a basic "taken for granted fashion an organisation's view of itself and its environment" (Schein, 1999: 238). It is the leader who needs to embed and transmit culture (Schein, 1999). Schein also emphasises that leaders start the culture formation process by imposing their own assumptions on their subordinates.

How do leaders create culture in a school?

Table 1 displays the essential ingredients in the culture embedding mechanisms according to Schneider (1990, in Schein, 2004).

Table 1: Culture embedding mechanisms (Schneider, 1990 in Schein, 2004)

Primary embedding mechanisms	Secondary articulation and reinforcement mechanisms
What leaders pay attention to, measure and control on a regular basis	Organisational design and structure
How leaders react to critical incidents and organisational crises	Organisational systems and procedures
Observed criteria by which leaders allocate scarce resources	Organisational rites and rituals
Deliberate role modelling, teaching, and coaching	Design of physical space, facades, and buildings
Observed criteria by which leaders allocate rewards and status	Stories, legends, and myths about people and events
Observed criteria by which leaders recruit, select, promote, retire, and excommunicate organisational members	Formal statements of organisational philosophy, values and creed.

The primary embedding mechanisms and secondary reinforcing mechanisms show how leaders "embed the assumptions that they hold and thereby create the conditions for culture formation" (Schein, 2004: 270). Robbins et al. (2009: 325) mention that "a strong culture can act as a substitute for formalisation. High formalisation by the leader in an organisation creates predictability, orderliness and consistency". The research also provides evidence that the principal/leader is responsible for creating a strong culture.

Research methodology

The researcher conducted a field study of four weeks each in both a functional school and a dysfunctional secondary school in a low socio-economic area, seeking responses to three open ended questions: What can you tell me about your school? What are the strengths and weaknesses of your school? How can you improve your school? Interviews were conducted with learners in class, administrative clerks, teachers, parents, school governing body (SGB) members, members of the Representative Council of Learners (RCL) (learners who are elected by all learners to represent them on the SGB), and even the cleaners in the two schools being investigated. The documents analysed in this study comprise the following: minutes of staff meetings; minutes of SGB meetings; minutes of RCL meetings; school developmental plans; school policy; and newsletters and memos to parents. Qualitative methods of observation, semi-structured interviews and document analysis were used with all stakeholders in the functional as well as the dysfunctional school in a low socio-economic area to triangulate the findings. By investigating two schools in a poor socio-economic area the investigator ensured that the contextual variables for both cases were the same.

Data analysis

Data collected from the semi-structured interviews, field notes taken during observation, and school documents was analysed using 'reduction' and 'interpretation' techniques (Marshall, 1999).

The researcher took a voluminous amount of information, reduced it to certain patterns, categories, or themes, and interpreted it by using certain schema. This process is called "de-contextualisation" and re-contextualisation" according to Tesch (1990).

Firstly the interviews, observation field notes and documents were analysed by writing codes next to the appropriate segments of the text. The researcher found the most descriptive wording for the topics and turned them into categories. She then associated the categories with the culture creation mechanisms according to Table 1 (Schneider, 1990, in Schein, 2004).

Findings and discussion

The principal of the functional school displayed all the culture creating mechanisms; however the findings and discussion in this article concentrate on the primary embedding mechanisms, since the secondary articulation and reinforcement mechanisms (physical facilities, etc.) are generally provided by the Department of Education. Thus, a principal can change or create culture by concentrating on the primary embedding mechanisms. The principal in the dysfunctional school showed signs of victimisation against him and failed to realise that he had the authority to create a positive school culture. His finger pointing by blaming others for his faults and lack of self-esteem in implementing plans to create a functional school culture led to him cowering in his office behind closed doors.

What principals pay attention to, measure and control on a regular basis

Schein (2004) emphasises that what principals consistently pay attention to, communicates their own priorities, goals and assumptions most clearly. If they pay attention to too many things, or if their pattern of attention is inconsistent, subordinates will use other signals of their own experience to decide what is really important, leading to a diverse set of assumptions and many subcultures.

In the functional school, the principal paid attention to the discipline of educators and learners, the punctuality and attendance of educators and learners, management by the Heads of Department (HODs), empowerment of the deputy principals (who were also considered leaders), and the functional role of the SGB. He ensured that the parents were educated on their roles and responsibilities regarding their learners. During interviews with the matriculants, one learner said "He motivated us and our parents that this year is the most important year in our lives. He said that if we go to university, we will live better lives". During observation it was clear that this principal managed "by walking around".

On the other hand, the principal in the dysfunctional school paid attention to the burglary that took place during the July holidays. He had a laptop with him since the computers were all stolen from his school, and he busied himself writing a report to the district about the burglary.

How leaders react to critical incidents and organisational crises

When an organisation faces a crisis, the manner in which the principal deals with it creates new norms, values and working procedures, and reveals important underlying assumptions. The principal in the functional school dealt with the root causes of problems and not only the symptoms. When a youth day celebration was planned, the learners wore "civvies" (casual clothes rather than the school uniform) to raise funds. The principal found that many learners were drinking on the school premises. Together with his SMT, he divided the school into areas and walked around. He found a large amount of alcohol and cigarettes which he confiscated and noted the names of the learners. Parents were immediately notified and learners were given a strict warning. By including parents in controlling discipline and by filing sheets of misconduct against each learner, this principal signalled that he is serious about prohibiting smoking and drinking in his school. He walks around the school every morning and during both breaks to ensure that all boys are in the classrooms and not smoking in the toilets.

How leaders allocate resources

How budgets are created in an organisation is another process that reveals leader assumptions and beliefs. The principal of the functional school allocated resources according to the needs and priorities of the school. He was aware of the exact figure deposited into the school's account by the department and of the breakdown allocations, as per departmental policy.

He bought learning and teaching support material with the entire allocated amount and did not allow the expenditure for matric dances and other celebrations to come out of his government grant. The matric learners raised 100% of the money for their celebration. The tuck shop makes a profit, which can contribute towards any shortfall in schools funds. The principal was clearly able to plot the purposes for which he intended to use the profits from the tuck shop. He has so far purchased a school kombi (small bus) and constructed shelters for parked cars using these funds. He was very transparent about the use of financial resources during the interview, as well as in staff meetings. He presents monthly financial statements to the staff and SGB. Clearly there is a shared understanding and acceptance of how funds are utilised in the school.

The principal of the dysfunctional school seemed to be unable to control his resources. During an interview, one educator said "the department provides financial resources, but they do not control it". This leads to the SGB doing what they please. The funds are controlled by the SGB chairman. The principal is afraid to take control. The educator representatives do not represent the viewpoint of educators because they do not have a say during SGB meetings. The parent component of the SGB is militant. They threaten the educator representatives if they challenge decisions made by the parent component. The parent component in the SGB views the educators as enemies because they want to manage the school professionally. They "degrade the teachers and never encourage or reward teachers" (Interview with SGB educator representative).

Deliberate role modelling, teaching and coaching

Good leaders generally know that their own visible behaviour has great value in communicating assumptions and values to other staff members, especially newcomers. This was true of the behaviour of the principal in the functional school He managed by walking around and being continually visible. For example, he was either personally distributing invitations to a parent meeting to learners, or delivering memos from the district to educators. He has realised the need for and has created a sense of urgency, acting strictly according to timeframes. He constantly monitors teaching, learning, cleanliness and maintenance of the buildings, as part of ensuring that the vision of the school is being achieved. He is a role model, educator and coach. He inspires his educators to be committed to the vision of the school by budgeting for educator incentives.

The principal of the dysfunctional school allocated R18 000 for a matriculation farewell party when his learners had no text books, or five learners were sharing one text book in grades 11 and 12. His priorities are confused and hence he has lost the trust and respect of his educators. During the observation period he was never punctual and often left early to visit a doctor or went off on a personal errand. He watched the learners escape through holes in the fence and did not reprimand them. He heard the unbearable noise emanating from the classrooms, yet he did not walk around the school to monitor whether teaching and learning was taking place. His school was filthy, and he could not supervise the cleaners to tidy up. He seemed to be totally incompetent as a principal.

How leaders allocate rewards and status

Members of any organisation learn from their own experience with promotions, performance appraisals, and discussions with the leader about what the school values and what the school punishes. The principal of the functional school allocated rewards appropriately. Being aware of the considerable amount of effort that the matric teachers made by preparing for and attending morning, evening, afternoon and holiday classes, he gave them a wonderful bonus with the permission of the SGB. The profits from the tuck shop were used for these rewards. This principal was the all-round winner of the award for outstanding leadership in secondary schools at the National Teachers Awards. He created 'winning situations' and built on them.

The principal of the dysfunctional school was oblivious to the good and the bad elements in his school. He did not allocate rewards to good educators or learners. Eleven matriculants out of 191 achieved exemption in the SCE. He could have used this as an opportunity to highlight the importance of studying in providing opportunities for a brighter future. It was observed that some educators were punctual and did attend classes. They made attempts to teach with the limited resources that they had. He could have called them in and praised them, or praised them during assembly or at a staff meeting. In order to embed good behaviour, he needs to implement some sort of reward system in his school. He was not able to identify the opportunities to create a positive culture to contribute to school improvement and functionality.

Criteria by which leaders recruit, select, promote, retire and excommunicate organisational members

One of the most subtle yet most potent ways through which cultural assumptions are embedded and perpetuated is the process of selecting new staff. If a principal assumes that the best way to build an organisation is to hire very tough, independent people and then leave them alone, and he is successful in continuing to hire tough and independent people, he will create the kind of culture that he assumes will work best. He may never realise that the success of the culture lies in the success of the recruitment effort and that his beliefs about how to organise might become disconfirmed if he can no longer hire the right kinds of people to fit his assumptions (Schein, 2004).

In the functional school, the SGB recommends the appointment of new educators and candidates for promotion posts. The principal said in the first interview with me that there is no place for educators who shirk their responsibilities. The existence of misconduct charges against educators is proof that he is serious about service delivery and the quality of teaching and learning at his school.

However, the principal of the dysfunctional school said "Having studied the mood of the school, I motivated the SGB to allocate the new promotion posts to internal candidates. All HOD positions were given to internal candidates. This did not solve the problems, it actually worsened the situation". Once again, the principal's decision was unwise. Selection procedures for promotion posts were not based on merit, but on popularity.

Conclusion

The study shows that the primary embedding mechanisms are directly related to the knowledge, skills, behaviour, attitudes and beliefs of the principals. The principal of the functional school was able to embed all the primary cultural mechanisms in his school with ease. He realises that he is in authority and takes responsibility and is accountable for creating and reinforcing good behaviour and attitudes regarding teaching and learning. The principal in the dysfunctional school is not aware of his authority as the leader and seems to have allowed the SGB chairman to create a dysfunctional culture in the school. He is responsible for destroying the culture of teaching and learning. This school principal lacks confidence and behaves inconsistently, which has led to school dysfunctionality.

Recommendations

The principals' knowledge, skills, behaviour, attitudes and beliefs towards the creation of culture and school functionality are different in the two schools that were investigated. School leaders need to realise their role and responsibility in creating a culture of teaching and learning. This article provides evidence that the role of the principal in creating culture in the school is essential in order to build a functional school. Therefore, it is essential that workshops and on-site visits by district officials be conducted for principals to inform them of the primary embedding mechanisms and the secondary reinforcement mechanisms, so as to enable them to build a strong culture for effective performance in their schools. Workshops should be designed in a practical way, such as having principals bring in their school improvement plans, identify weaknesses therein and then create appropriate primary embedding cultural mechanisms. The academic programme, the Advanced Certificate in Education (School Leadership) needs to include materials training principals to be proactive in creating primary embedding cultural mechanisms toward school functionality.

Acknowledgement

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